Arpillera Journeys

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KAREN NICKELL

Lecturer in History and Theory for Textile Art, Design and Fashion, Belfast School of Art, Ulster University

This article explores connections between Irish and South American textile accounts of conflicts and the journey of a collection of *arpilleras* (brightly-coloured patchwork pictures) from Chile to Derry, Northern Ireland. During the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile (1973-1989) there were 3,197 victims (2,095 dead and 1,102 'disappeared'). In relation to population size, the number of deaths in the Northern Irish conflict − 'the Troubles' (1968-1998) − was eight times greater than Chile. Unlike Northern Ireland, many who 'disappeared' in Chile were high profile, non-combatants and professionals. Women were left to search for their husbands and sons and provide for their families. They had to find a way to survive and function within a system dominated by masculine authoritarian power which confined them to the domestic sphere, and they found a unique way to both protest and survive by sewing *arpilleras* (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 *¿Dónde Están / Where are they?* Chilean arpillera, anon, early 1980s
Conflict Textiles Collection. Photo: Martin Melaugh

The *arpillera* became not only a source of income but also a means of social, political, personal and artistic expression within the mutual support of a sewing group. The materials were inexpensive scraps, usually old clothes; the backing was made from flour bags, giving the *arpillera* its name (burlap). Guy Brett describes the inherent

duality between how the *arpilleras* were made with love, care and pleasure in the use of materials and their subject matter: 'women show injustice and sorrow with great exactness and truthfulness but do not allow their life and will to drain away.'[1] The narrative was not always of the 'disappeared' or of suffering and oppression, sometimes it remembered happier times.

Arpilleras found their way into the wider world through humanitarian organisations that sold them to raise funds and awareness. Roberta Bacic, Professor of Philosophy and Human Rights, who lectured in Chile (1973-81), collected *arpilleras* in support of the women. After the Pinochet regime she worked for the National Corporation of Reparation and Reconciliation (1993-1996), seeking the truth of what had happened during the regime. She was frustrated that 'the pain and emotion had to be discarded, only the legal testimony was required for the commission; the impact on the women was irrelevant.'[2] Bacic believes 'you can't contribute to the history unless you archive and make things accessible', so recognising the *arpilleras* as the personal testimony that had been deemed 'irrelevant', she now works tirelessly to bring these neglected stories to the attention of the world. Since 2008 she has been involved in the curation of more than 80 exhibitions of 'conflict textiles'; half of these have been in Northern Ireland and the rest around the world. This article discusses a few of the most recent exhibitions in Northern Ireland.

The Art of Survival conference held in Nűrnberg in May 1995 shared knowledge and experiences of women's textile work in the informal sector. The work shown at this conference became a travelling exhibition, *Art of Survival: Fabric Images of Women's Daily Lives*. Bacic (now living in Northern Ireland) began to use some of her *arpillera* collection as a catalyst to facilitate cross-community dialogue. In 2006 she showed an *arpillera Displaced Women of Peru: Yesterday and Today* at the West Belfast Festival and the following year she showed it at Prehen House in Derry so it could be seen by the 'other side'.[3] The Mayor of Derry (Helen Quigley) saw the *arpillera* and invited Bacic to bring *The Art of Survival* exhibition to the city. As guest curator, Bacic extended the scope of the exhibition to *The Art of Survival: International and Irish Quilts* (2008), adding *arpilleras* from her own collection and putting out a call for socio-political Irish textiles.

Bacic holds discussions and textile workshops alongside the exhibitions she curates. *Arpilleras* are pieced, appliquéd and embroidered − techniques that are familiar in Ireland where textile traditions include both embroidery and pieced utility patchwork quilts. A number of Irish stitchers began to make smaller panels, influenced by the *arpillera*, rather than the large quilts that are more typical of Ireland. Bacic displayed these alongside the Chilean *arpilleras* to open up further discussion about

tensions and conflict. In 2009, Sonia Copeland, a life-long quilter, made *No Going Back* when three killings threatened peace (Fig. 2). She depicted the cross-community protests at Belfast City Hall that expressed solidarity and the 'resolve that nothing and no-one would steal from my children the right to a peaceful life, which was stolen from me and my generation.'[4]

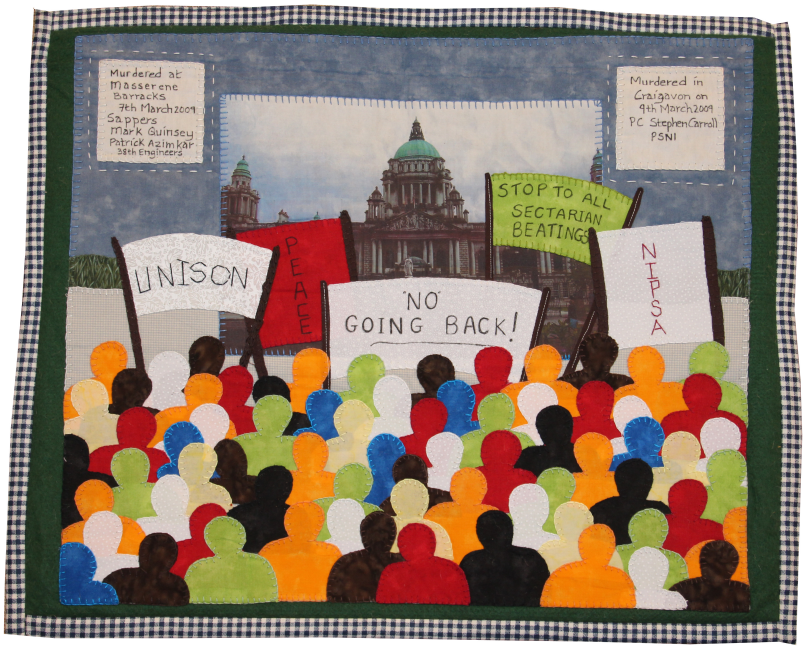

Fig. 2 Sonya Copeland, *No Going Back*, 2009. Photo: Karen Nickell

Fig. 3 Workshop in conjunction with *Stitching and Unstitching the Troubles 1*, Coleraine Town Hall, 2012. Photo: Karen Nickell

A three-stage exhibition, *Stitching and Unstitching the Troubles* (2012-13), was part of a North East peace project to explore and record community memories of the Troubles and encourage and support dialogue around people's experiences of the conflict. Follow-up exhibitions showed narratives about the Troubles that emerged through the community workshops running alongside the exhibitions (Fig. 3). The

retelling of personal memory though textiles allows an intimacy and engagement with the viewer who is invited to share the story (Fig. 4). These conflict textile exhibitions are on-going and have gathered further momentum through the involvement of international researchers and academics in symposia and conferences and the interest of mainstream institutions.[5] The exhibition *Disobedient Objects* (2014-15) at the Victoria and Albert Museum included four of Bacic's collection of *arpilleras* (one from Ireland, two from Chile and one from Colombia), bringing women's grassroots stitching, as a form of protest, to a wider audience.

Fig. 4 Anne McLaughlin, *Pub Bombing Cushendall*, 2013. Stitched in a community workshop. Photo: Karen Nickell

At a symposium at Queen's University Belfast to accompany the launch of the book *Stitching Resistance Women, Creativity, and Fiber Art*s (reviewed in this issue, see pp. 76-77*,* academics from diverse disciplines, textile makers and conflict-related organisations and researchers came together to discuss textile narratives of conflict, testimony and resistance.[6] This cross-disciplinary area of conflict research and textile narrative is one that is just beginning to be explored and it was refreshing to see makers offered the opportunity to contribute to the debate. A few months later, an international conference, *Accounts of the Conflict: Digitally Archiving Stories for Peacebuilding* (November 2014), was hosted in Belfast by the Ulster University International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE). An exhibition, *Textile Accounts of Conflicts*, was commissioned to accompany the conference and this presented 'first hand testimony of the destructive and multi-layered impact of conflict and human rights abuse' − communicated in textile form to the conference audience.[7]

The exhibition moved to the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, where it was open to the public. Here the work was installed throughout a vertical (stair-well) gallery alongside the Library's permanent collection of political posters; it was a difficult exhibition space but a superb context (Fig. 5). Conversations and narratives oscillated between the textiles and the posters, and together they offered the opportunity for active and reflexive debate about the past in a safe, accessible, public, cultural space. Textile students from the University visited the exhibition; they found it profoundly engaging and were particularly affected by local textile pieces that reflected their family or community experiences. Some had lost relatives in the Troubles; some came from areas in Derry and Belfast where conflict had been intense. One was from the sleepy village that had been devastated by the bomb illustrated in Fig. 4; many had heard 'stories' from their parents about the Troubles, and seeing these stories visually represented by ordinary women (sometimes in crude, child-like stitching) elicited surprisingly powerful responses. Most of the students had grown up in a post-conflict society and had not given the past much thought; some said they learnt more about history from the exhibition than they had at school; others realised for the first time that the on-going sectarian tensions in society were rooted in past-events; and several are continuing to research conflict textiles for their undergraduate dissertation.

Fig. 5 *Textile Accounts of Conflicts*, Vertical Gallery, Linen Hall Library, Belfst, 2015. Photo: Karen Nickell

The *arpilleras* that have been part of this on-going dialogue with audiences and makers in Northern Ireland are now coming home to the Tower Museum, Derry, where they were first exhibited in 2008. The *Conflict Textiles* collection (encompassing over 260 *arpilleras*, quilts and wall-hangings) is being transferred from Bacic to the archive collection of Derry City Council, who will make them available as a public resource. The collection is being exhibited and transferred in stages; the first exhibition of *Arpillera Journeys* shown in the Tower Museum (March – May 2015) is now in the Derry City Council archive. Most of the exhibitions have been accompanied by workshops, lectures and catalogues – images of work and documentation are available on *Conflict Textiles*, an 'associated site' of CAIN (Conflict Archive on the INternet) at Ulster University, Northern Ireland. This comprehensive web-based resource documents women's experiences in conflict (and the aftermath of conflict) as expressed through textiles.[8] Northern Irish society is now entering a post-conflict phase where there is sufficient emotional and temporal distance from the past to begin to engage with memory in a way that allows for multiple views and interpretations. Textiles can play a part in providing a safe cultural space for communities to explore their experiences. Conflict textiles can act as a catalyst for a (still) divided society to engage in reciprocal dialogue rather than didactic and dictatorial rhetoric.

For more information on Troubles Textiles, see Chapter 6 of the author's doctoral thesis, 'Embroidery in the Expanded Field: Textile Narrative in Irish Art post-1968', Ulster University, 2014. Available as a PDF on author's website (www.karennickell.co.uk) or from the British Library e-theses service (ethos.bl.uk).

NOTES

1. G. Brett, 'Through their own eyes', in M. Agosin (ed.), *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: the Arpillera Movement in Chile, 1974-1994*, University of New Mexico Press, 1996, p. 27.

2. Interview with Roberta Bacic, 24 November 2011, Benone, Co. Antrim.

3. Image and details are available on; http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fulltextiles/?id=198

4. *The Human Cost of War*, 2009, exhibition catalogue, p. 10; http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/mediafiles/68_Derry_Human%20Cost%20of%20War_Catalogue_041110.pdf

5. Selected exhibitions in N. Ireland include: *The Art of Survival International and Irish Quilts* (Derry, 2008); *The Human Cost of War* (Derry, 2010); *Story Makers* (Derry, 2008-2012); *Stitching and Unstitching the Troubles* (Coleraine, Ballymena, Limavady,

2012-13); *Textile Accounts of Conflicts* (Belfast, 2014-15) and *Arpillera Journeys* (Derry, 2015).

6. M. Agosin (ed.), *Stitching Resistance: Women, Creativity and Fiber Arts*, Solis Press, 2014.

7. R. Bacic, *Textile Accounts of Conflicts* exhibition brochure, see http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/mediafiles/637_2015-02-06_Belfast_Textile-Accounts_Brochure.pdf

8. *Conflict Textiles*, see http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/